

January 19, 2007 -- I want to thank the people of Vermont for electing me to serve you in the United States House of Representatives.

These first two weeks have been remarkable.

In our first 100 hours of business, we have started to take America in a new direction with a series of common sense initiatives- and we did it the Vermont way, with strong bipartisan support.

Right off the bat, we changed the way Congress does business.

Our first step was to enact ethics reforms that will make our Congress-your Congress-more open and honest. We severed the link between lobbyists and lawmakers by finally banning lobbyists' gifts, meals and travel.

To return to fiscal responsibility, we adopted pay-as-you-go budgeting. This will begin to reverse the record budget deficits that are unfairly saddling future generations with trillions in debt. We also passed reforms that will cut down on the explosion of wasteful earmarks.

Next we put in place measures that offer real help to working families.

More than 13,500 Vermonters with college loans will benefit from cuts we passed for student loan interest rates- reductions that will save a Vermont student who begins college in 2011 an average of \$4,370.

We passed the first increase in the federal minimum wage in nine years, which will not only help America's lowest paid workers rise out of poverty, but will also level the playing field between higher wage states like Vermont and its neighbors.

For me, there was no more vivid example of the recklessness of the previous Congress than the Medicare Part D drug program that offered a much-needed benefit, but sold out our seniors and taxpayers to favor the drug industry. We corrected that shortcoming last week by requiring the Medicare program to negotiate the lowest possible prices- a step that can save our seniors and taxpayers billions.

And we authorized stem cell research programs to provide hope for cures to some of the most debilitating health conditions.

Finally, we took major steps to take America's security and energy policy in a new direction.

By fully implementing the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, America will be made safer from terrorist attacks.

And before coming home this weekend, we took the common sense step of ending the tax breaks for oil companies making record profits and directed the savings to the development of renewable energy.

As I traveled around the state over the last year meeting thousands of Vermonters, these ideas received broad and enthusiastic supports from Republicans, Democrats, Progressives, and independents alike. This progress is not just the Democratic agenda, but what I believe to be America's agenda.

While proud of these accomplishments, one cannot talk about a new direction for America without addressing the need for a new direction in Iraq.

The President regrettably has ignored the Iraq Study Group's bipartisan recommendations. Instead he called for a reckless escalation of the same failed policy by sending more than 20,000 additional troops to Iraq. I vigorously oppose this action.

First, I have signed on as an original co-sponsor of Congressman Jack Murtha's legislation calling for the end to U.S. combat in Iraq and the redeployment of troops within the region. Second, I am also supporting legislation to require congressional approval of any escalation. Finally, I intend to view with great skepticism any supplemental request by the President to fund this war.

I will continue to pursue the goal I share with so many Vermonters: to end the war and bring our troops home as soon as possible.

We are off to a good start, but I know our work is just beginning as we work to take our country in a new direction.

Peter Welch, of Hartland, is Vermont's Representative to the United States Congress.